Issue No. 46 April 2017

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter

Open Day 2017
Sunday 21st May

There will be a plant stall again, with a wide variety of plants for sale. Donations of plants from Friends would be welcome. There will be the usual refreshments served from 11 am in the new classroom, and we would welcome contributions of home baking to this stall as it usually goes down very well!

Admission to the Open Day is free to members on production of their membership cards, and for non-embers is at the very reasonable price of £3, with accompanied under 16s free, so please tell your family and friends about the event and let's try and make this year's Open Day even more of a success than last year.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL REMINDER
Annual subscriptions were due on 1st November 2016.
They are £8 per person or £12 for two people living at the same address
Anyone who has not paid by the Open Day 2017 will be removed from the database.
Cheques should be made payable to "The Friends of Thwaite Gardens" and sent to the treasurer, whose contact details are on the last page of this Newsletter.
Please note: new members who joined on, or after, the Open Day in May 2016 do not have to renew their subscriptions until November 2017.

TREES OF THWAITE

INDIAN HORSE CHESTNUT (*Aesculus indica*)

Everyone will be familiar with the common white horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) a number of which adorn the gardens at Thwaite. It is probably the first tree each of us learns the name of in childhood – as the 'conker tree'. There are several facts about this tree which surprise most people however. The first is, despite its familiarity, it is not native to Britain. Indeed although native to Europe, in nature it is confined to a restricted area of the Balkan region of Albania and northern Greece. The second is that common horse chestnut is only one of many species spread around the northern hemisphere and that both Asia and North America contain many more than Europe although some of these are surprisingly small and shrubby in nature and it must be said only a few rival the grandeur of the European species. One that does however is the Indian Horse Chestnut – *Aesculus indica*.

Although the name 'Indian' suggests a species of a semi tropical character – the Indian horse chestnut originates from high in the north western Himalaya, so is quite at home in cool temperate climates. Having said that, it probably flourishes best in reasonably sheltered warm conditions. Although it is reported to have exceeded 25m in Britain, this would be exceptional and most seen here, certainly locally, are rather smaller than this. I have to say, that by far the finest example I have personally seen was in a garden by the Italian

lakes and one is tempted to attribute this to the considerably greater summer heat and sunshine levels experienced in that part of Europe. Nevertheless, there are a few respectable examples growing in East Yorkshire and to be fair, none of these is yet old enough to give an idea of their potential performance here. Other than Thwaite gardens, this tree is only infrequently seen, including on the University main campus and a particularly fine young tree in North Ferriby, though many others occur and one might encounter it anywhere.

Aesculus indica has an air of greater refinement than common horse chestnut. It seems more elegantly put together and the foliage is far less coarse, with narrower tapering leaflets of a smoother, darker, glossier green. An attractive feature of the foliage when it emerges in spring is that it has a rich coppery red colour at first. Indian chestnut blooms about a month later than the common species, starting more or less as the common chestnut has faded away. The flower panicles are clearly 'horse chestnut' and could not be mistaken for anything else but are more delicate and slender. The tree in full bloom is very eye catching. Conkers follow, in more pear shaped and smoother cases than common chestnut. But the seeds themselves can be impressively large in a good season and are very dark almost blackish brown. It is easy to propagate new trees from seed and a fair number of self- sown seedlings have appeared in Thwaite gardens.

We have two examples of Indian chestnut at Thwaite. Both are unusual in certain respects. The older and larger of the two grows to the rear of Thwaite Hall near the steps. It is however a multi stemmed tree with no clear trunk. Although rather odd, this multi stemmed character is apparently a feature of some individuals of this species, so is not an abnormality.

The smaller tree, more clearly trunked, grows between Green Wickets and the lake and is easily noticed in flower when crossing the little wooden bridge. It is grafted at the base onto common horse chestnut and the join can be easily seen. It is the prettier of the two trees and is probably the named

variety ‘Sydney Pearce’, selected for its superior qualities, which is invariably grafted.

Although prone to certain leaf diseases, the Indian chestnut does not seem as affected by leaf miner as common chestnut. Leaf miner is now universal on the common species and causes the foliage to brown off in late summer a month or two ahead of normal leaf senescence, although it does not seem to cause the tree significant harm. Hopes lie with certain parasitic wasps following the miner as a natural control, several of which are now known to be living in Britain, although it is not yet clear how successfully they will deal with the miner here. This is an example of the world wide transport of pathogens around the globe following as a result of mass travel and huge volumes of increasingly free global trade in biological items. It has precipitated many ecological disasters already in different parts of the world, in some cases far more serious than the well known Dutch Elm Disease of Europe. Some authorities consider that uncontrolled pathogen spread is a greater threat to biodiversity than even habitat destruction and climate change combined.

Thwaite has a number of other rarer horse chestnuts in a little collection clustered together near the Paulownia at the rear of Thwaite hall.

John Killingbeck
April 2017

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Diary DATES

Open Day

Sunday 21st May, 11am to 4pm

Open Evening

Wednesday 21st June
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PLANT OF THE MONTH

MELIANTHUS (*Melianthus major*)

This is an example of a plant with no established English name, yet is easily memorised by its Latin name *Melianthus* – which basically means 'honey flower'. It is also an example of a plant which hovers indecisively between being a shrub and being an herbaceous plant. Given a reasonably mild winter or consistently mild climate it readily and rapidly produces permanent aerial growth around 2 or 3m in height. But following a hard winter, or in a generally cold climate, it dies back to the base and re sprouts the following spring to attain about 1m by the end of summer. In a climate like East Yorkshire's which wavers between these limits, it can be a difficult plant to place in the garden – being potentially too overwhelming for the herbaceous border, yet unreliably impermanent as a shrub. The best policy is perhaps to make a determined decision to make it a real feature plant and give it the best chance of gaining a full time presence by placing it is a warm sheltered situation. Any surviving growth which happens to be too tatty by the end of the winter can simply be cut back.

A feature plant *Melianthus* certainly is – having an air of the outsized vegetation of the tropics – making it popular with exotic garden enthusiasts. Yet it somehow manages to fit in with more traditional gardens as well. The foliage is the main reason why most people admire the plant and consists of very bold silvery green serrated and pleated compound leaves which are eye catching even from a distance. If the leaves can be said to resemble anything, they are like a gigantic version of those of the small creeping plant – silverweed

(*Potentilla anserina*)- though silvery through waxiness rather than of silky hair like *Potentilla*. One odd feature is that the bruised leaves have a smell of roast meat – like stinking iris (*Iris foetidissima*).

If the stems survive the winter, they are likely to bloom the following summer. The flowers are rather astonishing dark reddish, nectar rich spikes of a vaguely monk's hood aspect which if fertilised may be succeeded by flanged seed pods.

Melianthus hails from South Africa where it commonly grows along river banks. For this reason as well as warmth and shelter, it grows the better for having good soil and moisture. Nevertheless, our plant at Thwaite, sheltered by the wall near the lean to greenhouse and car park has succeeded in very poor ground.

Having decided to grow *Melianthus*, it is worth starting with a strong young plant and protecting it during its first winter. Feed and water it well to achieve maximum growth. But once established, the only real maintenance is to tidy it up after the ravages of winter. This may consist of removing just a few of the tattiest leaves in mild years, or totally cutting back following severe ones. If the latter, don't despair – it can come back even following quite severe freezes.

Propagation is easy from seed, though these may have to be sought from a specialist supplier.

John Killingbeck Mar '17

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We welcome any contributions from members, of articles, photographs, letters etc. to future copies of the Newsletter, so if you would like something including, please contact the Editor, whose details are at the end of this Newsletter
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CARNIVOROUS PLANTS

At the Friends' AGM on 4th October, Pete Walker treated us to a lavishly illustrated talk about these specialist "weirdos" of the plant world, from his perspective as a supplier and exhibitor over many years. His business, "Wack's Wicked Plants" is now based at Scampston Gardens, east of Malton.

His interest was kindled by a chance encounter with these plants while working in the horticulture trade in Holland, and he began the business from the back garden of his house in Knaresborough.
Initially, popularity for his exhibits was mainly among some less mainstream groups, and the first part of the talk contained hilarious slides from such events as the Whitby Goth Festival, the Hull Horror Festival, and the Tattoo Convention in Leeds. However, with persistence and, as he put it, "moving 1000s of gallons of rainwater up and down the A1", success at horticultural shows followed, culminating in a gold medal at the Great Yorkshire Show.

The second part of Pete's talk described the various species of carnivorous plant found around the globe. Though notoriously all sharing a requirement for water free of calcium and any other nutrients, they are otherwise quite diverse. From the large tropical species, such as the giant *Puya chilensis* from the Andes, capable of trapping and digesting hummingbirds, and the Asian *Nepenthes raja*, whose pitchers can hold up to 2 litres of rainwater, Pete moved on to the smaller, hardier temperate plants.

Dionaea muscipula (Venus' Fly Trap) is, we learned, almost extinct in its native North American swamps due to over-collection: plants in garden centres have been propagated by tissue culture. Some pitcher-plants from N. America (S*arracenia*) and Australia (*Cephalotus*) are will grow outdoors in Britain, if watered well in summer and kept dry in winter.

The tiny, sticky-leaved sundews (*Drosera spp.)* and the butterworts (*Pinguicula*) with their yellow-green greasy basal leaf rosettes can be found in the wild on Britain's moors. But even nutrient-rich East Yorkshire has one wild carnivorous plant: in a few still canals and ditches, the solitary, yellow, rather snapdragon-like flowers of bladderwort (*Utricularia minor*) can be seen protruding from the surface of the water in July. Below the surface, tiny open-

ended bladders attached to the leaves bear forked hairs on the inside, which trap any small insect that swims in.

Rohan Lewis

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THWAITE GARDENS BOUNDARY FENCE

Those of you who walk regularly through the main woodland on the north side of the lake or if you use the snicket from New Village Road to the railway line, would have noticed that the University has been replacing the boundary fence running along the snicket and then turning south near the railway to Station Walk.

There is one section near the incoming stream which has been held up because of problems. These have now been resolved and the fence will be completed soon.

I can recall that the original fence in the 1950s was a chain linked fence which was replaced eventually by reinforced concrete panels blocking out the view into the grounds. At that time, the grounds were used solely by the students at Thwaite and surrounding student residences such as Holtby House, Greenwickets, Southlands and Cleminson Hall. These properties have now been sold by the University but the rear gardens belonging to Hotlby House, Greenwickets and Southlands, have been kept, increasing the size of Thwaite Gardens. The grounds cover approximately 31 acres (or 12.5 hectares for the younger readers).

The only time that part of the gardens and glasshouses were open to the general public was by the, then, Botany Department on Thursday afternoons from 13.00 to 16.30 pm from April to September.

To make it more accessible to the general public, the University set up the Friends of Thwaite Gardens around the year 2000, allowing members to enjoy
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all that the gardens offer from Monday to Friday during the time the University is open.

Returning to the fence, it has now been replaced with green mesh fencing with aesthetic appeal. The 1950's view from the snicket has been restored

The Grounds Maintenance Team who are responsible for the site decided to utilise some of the concrete slabs to improve the path near the lake leading to the narrow stream and the bridge crossing it to the main woodland. Martin and Graham the two members of ground staff who are based at Thwaite did the work. It was no mean feat as the reinforced slabs are heavy and they have laid approx. 300 of them as can be seen in the photo. Our thanks to them.

Please remember when walking through the woods to keep to the well -defined paths and to look out for trip hazards such as tree roots, low branches and uneven ground. We welcome any feedback regarding improvements.

Vic Swetez,
School of Environmental Sciences

EXOTIC GARDENS

A talk by Paul Spracklin at the evening meeting on 21.3.17

Paul Spracklin has a garden in Essex which some of us saw on Gardener's World last autumn. He has 30 years' experience as a gardener and plantsman. His talk was well illustrated with photographs and I was fascinated with what could be achieved in the UK.

Why create an exotic garden?

- It could be reminiscent of somewhere exotic
- It could have been seen in a botanical garden
- You might have travelled somewhere exotic and been inspired.

How to create an exotic garden?

Essentially this is the same as creating any garden, led by the plants you want and using themed landscaping. You will find some quite usual plants blend in. The three main categories of exotic plants are:

- Tender plants – bedded out and then lifted at the end of the summer and protected
- Tender plants protected in situ over winter using glass, fleece or straw
- Tropical looking plants that are hardy. Most palms are not hardy but some are – so it is important to identify and use these.

The garden then becomes a combination of all three.

Examples of gardens.

Paul showed us pictures of various gardens in the East of England and also Cotswold Wildlife Park where efforts are made to plant exotically as a context for the animals, from rhinos to meerkats, and where there is a heated outdoor pool (now using geothermal energy) enabling the growth of lots of different cannas, tropical water lilies, etc.

Paul's own garden is at Benfleet near where the Thames becomes an estuary. His annual rainfall is quite low so he decided to concentrate on drought-proof plants. He has lots of cactus and succulents and lots of "spikey plants" (go and look at our spikey plant raised bed at Thwaite).

Examples of Plants.

<u>Palms</u> – Chinese Windmill Palm / European Fan Palm / Feather Palms (one of which, the Chilean Wine Palm, is quite tough)

Bamboo – Basically there are two different types of bamboo: (1) the spreading type, which need to be avoided despite these having the pretty coloured stems (often on sale in garden centres) and which will spread relentlessly in all directions, and (2) the clumping type, which will not run and which are also more drought resistant. Paul showed us pictures of the two root types. The message is clear: if you want to plant a bamboo, make sure it is a clumping type. Also be mindful that some bamboos can grow very high.

Bananas – most are tender, but if you have the means of growing one, there are lots to choose from. There is one hardy one which will grow outside in the UK, forming a pseudo trunk and even fruiting, though the fruit tastes awful!

Tree ferns. A popular one *is Dicksonia antarctica*, though there are lots of other varieties. In Keldby Gardens in Ireland, one seed was planted and nurtured and there are now 8 acres of tree ferns, all from the first one.

Trees and shrubs. These are often compatible with exotics. Examples are : Cordyline (cheap to buy, fast to grow), Paulownia (foxglove tree – we have two at Thwaite) – if cut down to the ground each year, growth is vigorous and leaves can be a metre wide), Tree of Heaven, Acacias, Eucalyptus.

Evergreen shrubs such as *Fatsia japonica* (caster oil plant), Mahonia, Viburnum, etc.

Herbaceous plants can be mixed in – ginger lilies, busy lizzies, calla lilies, begonias, echiums and hellebores.

Aquatics – notably water lilies, Succulents – yucca, agave, aloe.

So: there were lots of ideas for achieving what could be quite unusual locally. The next day I was in London, and what did I see growing in gardens near King's Cross? – palm trees! I had never noticed them before.

Annie Bourton Card

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Gardens Opening Times Reminder

Monday to Thursday 10am to 3.30pm

Fridays 10am to 3pm, except on Bank Holidays and at other times when the University is closed.
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